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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1973, the Montana Association of Teachers of English surveyed 750 junior and senior high school English teachers in Montana, to gather information about their current teaching assignments, their preparation to teach, their current needs for teaching, and the priorities they saw for services or programs in the state university system. Almost half of the teachers responded. A second survey of needs, conducted in the fall of 1976, confirmed and updated the findings of the first survey. Both surveys led to the conclusion that college English programs generally seem to have disregarded actual teaching needs, and teachers seem not to have been trained to relate, adapt, or integrate the disparate materials and ideas they encountered in their course work. Among the needs most frequently mentioned by teachers who responded to the surveys were better workshops, new materials (primarily in the areas of composition and reading), extension courses for graduate credit, realistic summer course offerings, better internships and methods programs, media courses, and professors who know the school situation. (LJR)

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MONTANA ENGLISH TEACHER PREPARATION AND NEEDS: SURVEY AND ACTION, 1973-1977

by Jack Folsom

Anyone who reads the 1967 NCTE Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English, or the new 1976 Guidelines for that matter, will surely be struck by the apparent disparity between those Utopian visions and the harsher realities of underprepared and overworked teachers trying to get a job done with 150-180 students.

In order to get a better idea of the actual situation in Montana, we undertook a state-wide survey in 1973. The report in the following year helped to set in motion a more intensive effort in the state to improve the preparation of teachers of English and to meet the needs of those already in service. Our small but active NCTE affiliate, the Montana Association of Teachers of English (MATE), is now using funds from one of the three NCTE three-year grants awarded last year for NCTE/MATE Project English, an outreach program designed to provide resources and assistance to teachers in remote areas of the state. A second survey of needs, conducted in the Fall of 1976 by Linda Shadiow, current Montana English Supervisor, confirms and brings up to date what the first survey found. Since other states are now interested in similar surveys, we hope that our experience, including our mistakes, will be of some help.

In the Fall of 1973, with the cooperation of the then state English

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Supervisor, Bill Ferguson, we sent out a lengthy questionnaire to all 750 identifiable teachers of Junior and Senior High School English in Montana. The questionnaire was intended to gather information about their present teaching assignment, their preparation to teach, their present needs for teaching, and whatever priorities they saw for services or programs in the state university system. The questionnaire enabled some statistical tabulations under eleven headings, but it was basically a rather informal net to gather information and opinion, so that the university system and MATE could adjust their priorities and programs appropriately.

Almost half of the teachers responded, and of these, 44% reported teaching at least one additional subject beside English, in many cases a subject such as Reading, which they considered to be separate from the English curriculum. There was evidence that a sizeable percentage of the teachers had been trained, and now taught, in a fragmented and compartmentalized manner, at a time when relating and integration were badly needed in English instruction.

As to training, 70% of the teachers reported that they had in-state undergraduate degrees, and they otherwise indicated that their backgrounds and points of view were quite parochial rather than diverse or nationally oriented. Only 20%, for example, reported membership in NCTE, and 24% membership in MATE, while 62% said they belonged to chapters of local professional organizations like MEA or AFT. Assuming that the 50% who did not respond to the questionnaire were even less active or involved in NCTE or its state affiliate, we saw a very slight impact indeed of all of the resources and professionalism of the national English teaching scene. Our problem in Montana is further compounded by immense distances and the geographic isolation of many of our teachers in very small communities.

Even so, 70% of the respondents reported a moderate or large amount of postgraduate study, and 22% reported having some kind of master's degree, the vast majority of these being high school teachers. Although our questionnaire failed to distinguish between "inservice" credits for renewal of certificate and more substantial graduate study, we were able to determine that recent workshop attendance averaged 25%, more in methods and literature than in language or composition. At the same time, only 14% reported having taken recent summer courses in literature, 11% in methods, 8% in language, and only 7% in composition. A similarly small percentage (8%) had recently taken extension or continuing education courses. We knew that the summer offering of courses in Montana was very limited at the time, but again, lack of incentive and the hardship of geographic distance help to account for these figures. It was obvious that for further training to improve their subject mastery and teaching, these teachers needed not only more incentive, but also to have programs and resources nearer at hand. A large area of Montana is at least 400 miles removed from either state university, and the state and community colleges can offer very little in more advanced English study for teachers.

The subject matter course preparation of these teachers has been quite thin. Typically, a teacher has taken only four or five courses in what we consider to be basic and essential areas of literature. In composition, only 26% reported that they had taken a course in the evaluation of student writing, and an even smaller percentage had taken anything in advanced exposition, prose analysis, or process-oriented instruction in rhetoric. The situation was even worse in language, where 58% had taken some kind of introductory language course, but only 10% had had any training in dialects and usage. Since language and composition are essential components of the

school English curriculum, we concluded that teacher preparation had been inadequate for the task. In many cases, the course work in all areas (language, composition, literature) had either been taken too early for the teaching relevance to be seen, or the courses were not taught in a manner that would enable the teachers to adapt and use the material. Many centrally important courses for teaching were rated low in importance or usefulness by the teachers. College English seems generally to have disregarded actual teaching needs, and teachers seem not to have been trained to relate, adapt, or integrate disparate material on their own. At the same time, the teachers reported that their preparation in teaching approaches and methods, traditionally taught separate from English in Education departments, had been too general or superficial to be of much use. Their comments indicated that they were aware as soon as they started teaching that they were inadequately prepared. Others who might have been reasonably well trained at one time have failed to keep up with new developments in the discipline, in part because the new course offerings in Montana have been so limited.

The teachers were also asked to comment on what further preparation they thought they needed and what plans they had to pursue it. Almost half either did not respond or were not sure. They expressed a vague and general sense of inadequacy in the face of changing curriculum demands, but they also complained about the unavailability of appropriate summer courses or workshops. A majority thought that a summer master's degree program in English especially for teachers was a good idea (the University of Montana had a small one just started at the time, and Montana State has since developed one), and 28% even said they would definitely be interested, which gives some hope on questions of incentive and motivation.

The needs of teachers in the field not then being met were diverse and far-reaching, all the way from "please send me a catalogue" to "we need a complete overhaul of the whole teacher preparation program." The most frequently cited items were the following: (1) good workshops, (2) new materials, (3) extension graduate credit courses, (4) realistic summer course offering, (5) better internship and methods program, (6) media courses, (7) professors who know school situation, and (8) visit remote districts.

From the 1976 survey, we have more definitive data on some of these needs, although this survey was confined to requests for information, resources, and materials which could be provided under the NCTE grant. According to Linda Shadiow's report to NCTE, with 58 schools so far reporting, the following request priorities emerged:

1. Composition teaching strategies
2. Reading teaching strategies
3. Composition and reading student activities
4. Literature teaching strategies
5. Reading materials
6. Creative drama teaching strategies and activities
7. Composition materials.

Less frequently requested were research data and background information in the above areas, plus oral language development, film-media, linguistics, journalism, curriculum building, and "others," such as outdoor education. Composition and Reading teaching strategies are the big and immediate need.

We are hopeful that the Project English program will improve English instruction in Montana, not only by providing materials and resources, but also by sending top-notch teacher-consultants into these remote areas. But in one very significant way, the underlying need which was revealed by the 1973 survey is not yet being met. The argument is the same as with the old Commission on English and the N.D.E.A. Institutes of the 1960s: the

teachers say, "don't bother us with theory--give us materials we can use tomorrow." To this, the people in English Education say, "if you master the theory and concepts of the subject, you can develop or adapt better materials for your teaching situation than any canned goods that we or the publishing houses can provide." Perhaps the best solution we have to this stand-off between solid teacher preparation and immediate need is the wealth of new material published by NCTE, which, more and more frequently bootlegs concept mastery and solid research data with usable teaching strategies. If we can get more of these resources into the hands of teachers, then maybe their excellence will be translated into results. While those of us who know these theories, data, and resources talk only with each other at professional meetings, we must realize that the vast majority of teachers do not even know that help is available.

Montana State University, Bozeman
15 December 1976